

COMING UP FROM THE STREETS

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THE BIG ISSUE

ADF

ASIAN DUB FOUNDATION FIGHT BACK

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Fresh off a plane from Cape Town, Asian Dub Foundation's Pandit G is regaling fellow band-members Chandrasonic and Dr Das with his recent South African adventures. Holding court in a half-empty Camden pub, his unsmoked rollie burning out in an ashtray, he recounts how he and his wife befriended ex-ANC activists who turned out to be ADF fans, and who, on learning he was the Pandit G, showed them around the city's underground music scene; how he spotted Primal Scream's logo spray-painted onto a ghetto rooftop – "Bobby Gillespie's gonna be made up when I tell him!" – how South African rappers rock the mic over slowed-down house loops, not breakbeats; and how Cape Town's Asian community are descended from slaves, brought in by the British in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Eventually, guitarist Chandrasonic can contain himself no more. "For heaven's sake, man!" he guffaws, rolling his eyes skywards. "You were on your bloody honeymoon! What's wrong with sitting by the pool?" In truth, any of ADF's seven other members – they recently expanded from a five-piece, to include a percussionist, a drummer and two MCs, Aktar and Spex, replacing the departed Master D – would probably have done the same. Despite having chalked up four acclaimed albums, a Mercury Prize nomination (for Rafi's Revenge), a reworking of the soundtrack to French film classic *La Haine* – which they performed live in front of director Mathieu Kassovitz at last year's Meltdown, and is to be released on DVD – plus countless incendiary live shows, ADF's appetite for underground culture, radical ideas and obese b-lines remains insatiable. Even when honeymooning. And when they're not schooling the capital's youth in the art of dub at their long-running community music workshops, they're touring the less-fashionable corners of the globe – from Serbia to South America – dropping basslines, not bombs, on the indigenous populations.

Then there's the politics – ADF are as renowned for their political sensibilities as for their uniquely British sound, a Molotov

cocktail of dub, drum'n'bass, agit-rock, rap, bhangra and Bollywood loops. Journalists rarely fail to note how incongruous ADF's spleen-venting seems, in our cynicism-drenched, postmodern, *post-everything* musical climate. It's hard not to. Take current single, *Fortress Europe* – a pyrotechnic call-to-arms for asylum seekers to 'Break out of the detention centres/Cut the wires and tear up the vouchers/People get ready, it's time to wake up/Tear down the walls of Fortress Europe'. It stands out from its booty- and bling-fixated peers like a brassed-off Bengali in Benidorm.

"Right now, the parameters of what music is supposed to address are massively reduced," notes bassist Das. "When Bob Marley or Stevie Wonder – not that I'm comparing – made *Get Up, Stand Up* or *Living For The City*, people weren't going, 'Aha! So you're political singers! Why are you so political?'"

"And anyway," chips in Chandrasonic, "how can we not address what's going on with asylum seekers when they're attracting exactly the sort of negative headlines now that our parents did 20-30 years ago?"

"World leaders, especially Blair, tell us globalisation is a good thing," adds Das, soapbox now firmly under-foot, "that there has to be a free movement of money, free movement of multinationals, that we're living in a world with no borders. But if people start acting as if there's no borders, they can't deal with it."

Despite the stark vision of *Fortress Europe*, ADF aren't nihilists. They practically fall off their barstools at the suggestion. "Nihilistic?" echoes Pandit G. "We're the total opposite! We're optimists! Everything we say and do, we believe in!"

To those who believe that music is nothing more than entertainment, that it is incapable of *Making A Difference*, half an hour in the company of this easygoing, erudite trio might just change their minds. In 2000 ADF's campaigning single *Free Satpal Ram* helped keep the incarcerated Indian waiter's case in the public domain – he had stabbed a man to death in the course of defending himself from an unprovoked racist attack – with ►

photo: Hella Prigge

On Asian Dub Foundation's fifth album, *Enemy Of The Enemy*, their agit-rock is fresher than ever. But they're more than a political band who make a noise – they make a difference. By Matt Munday

IN ENEMY TERRITORY



Ram finally freed on parole last year after serving 15 years. His conviction still stands, though, and should he be returned to prison, "we'll kick the whole thing off again," vows Chandrasonic.

Then there are the legions of disaffected kids who have found inspiration in the ADFED community music workshops. Das and Chandrasonic proudly recall how one former protégé now runs his own internet radio station – "but we're not trying to produce people for the industry," Das cautions. "We're not flippin' Pop Idol! It means just as much to us that we had two kids in north London who went out and got jobs for the first time in their lives after coming to our workshops – they had never been bothered beforehand. It's all about giving people motivation to change their lives as well as a means of expression. If we're about anything, we're about encouraging people to be more independent."

Last year, ADF travelled to Brazil, a trip organised and funded by the British Council, both to play live and to sample the country's own community music projects. "It was very weird to be officially representing Great Britain," says Pandit G – who recently refused to accept an MBE as he felt it would be "inappropriate", "I'm holding out for a knighthood!" he quips – "but what we saw reinforced our belief in the power of music a thousand-fold. The conditions people live in are worse than anywhere in this country: the poverty, lack of resources and lack of support is terrible, and yet

"All the people who are regarded as enemies now were, at one point, nurtured and funded by the West" – Das

communities had these amazing music centres, full of these unbelievably talented kids."

Two Brazilian MCs appear on 19 Revolutions, a track on ADF's smart-bomb of a new album *Enemy Of The Enemy*. It was inspired by the true story of how Brazilian prisoners, protesting at overcrowding and inhuman treatment, managed to co-ordinate 19 simultaneous riots at prisons around the country. Activists emailed ADF as the action unfurled. According to Chandrasonic, the band receive "untold" communications from activists around the world every week.

Despite this, you can listen to *Enemy...* from start to finish and, apart from a couple of overtly political lines on *Fortress Europe*, the title track, and a couple of others – what really hits you is how fresh and feisty the music sounds. With their new percussion section in full effect and legendary dub producer Adrian Sherwood at the controls, ADF distil the myriad sounds of urban

Britain into a succession of anti-pop anthems and funk-out instrumentals. Sinéad O'Connor's guest appearance on future single 1,000 Broken Mirrors is a spine-tingling highlight – her emotion-scarred vocals drifting through a Massive-Attack-goes-to-Bollywood backdrop. The lyrics are based on another true story, that of Zoora Shah, accused of murdering her husband after years of domestic violence and humiliation.

This being ADF, though, the album title isn't exactly apolitical. "It's a reflection of the confusing times we live in," explains Das. "All the people who are regarded as enemies now were, at one point, nurtured and funded by the West. Saddam was empowered to fight Iran at the time of the Ayatollah, the Taliban set up to confront the Soviets towards the end of the Cold War. So they were once the enemy of the enemy... which made them friends. Now, they are the enemy – until they become friends again. We are told one thing in one era, and another in the next."

Then who, or what, is *The Enemy* to ADF?

A lengthy pause. And then: "Boredom!" pipes Das. "Yeah," nods Chandrasonic. "And apathy." "Creative stagnation, too," adds Pandit G. "People who complain but do nothing are the enemy! You have to keep moving, creating and questioning at all times." Even, it seems, when you're on your honeymoon.

Enemy Of The Enemy is out on Virgin on February 3. *Fortress Europe* is out now.

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ASIAN DUB FOUNDATION

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New album 'Enemy of the Enemy' released 3rd February

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